



## **Inspired And Uncomfortable | Does The Bible Support Slavery?**

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Well, Good Morning, Menlo Church, and welcome to a brand new series that we're starting this weekend called Inspired and Uncomfortable. And you're like, well, after that video, I'm uncomfortable.

So glad that you're here. We're going to take a few weeks uh, to talk about some passages in the Bible uh, that if we're honest about, sometimes we avoid them, um, because we're wondering like, how could God say that, or how could I believe that? How does that fit uh, within this bigger story of God's work in the world?

I do want to say a special thanks to the guys that joined me last week for our Father's Day panel. Guys from all of our campuses in Saratoga, Mountain View, Menlo Park, San Mateo. It was so fun! Feedback's been great, and you got to see just a sense of the caliber of guys right here at Menlo. I hope it was a blessing to you as well.

I also want to acknowledge that we are in some pretty tumultuous times right now. And if you're like, "What?" I would go, "Did you just come out of a coma?" Like, we are all living through some very difficult headlines, from political violence and hundreds of protests across our country last weekend, to major escalations in the Middle East between Israel and Iran, and now with the US's direct involvement in the last couple of days, to the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. It is overwhelming.

Now, I've heard from some people that would like me to cancel this series and just every week talk about one of those subjects with you. And while I honestly appreciate the fact that at least somebody wants to hear what I have to say about that stuff or have that conversation, I

also think that taking our message topics every week from the headline is not usually very wise, can be pretty exhausting, and is kind of counterproductive.

See, these events, they're unfolding in real time, and people in our own community will approach them from very different angles. And I believe that praying for God's work in the world and seeking personal and community spiritual formation together is a much more fruitful strategy, Anyway.

A pastor friend of mine this week told me about a group thread that he was in, and another pastor friend of his was like, "If they, like, whoever they are, if they would just put us pastors in charge, we'd fix the country." And I was like, "Man, I'd really appreciate that sentiment, but I don't know if you know this, they don't cover geopolitics in seminary. I'm not sure we do very well at that."

So if you're looking for a conversation, you, I really do want to continue this and figure out how to, you know, show up well in the midst of this, um, in the kind of the pitfalls of polarization. I'd recommend checking out the series that we did last year, called Smear Campaign. And if you're battling anxieties in a world very worthy of those anxieties right now, go check out the last series that we preached called Sound Mind.

Now, I'm going to encourage you to avoid one of two common mistakes in these conversations, which is viewing your faith through the lens of politics. I've already gotten the feedback today: Phil, don't talk about politics, just talk about the Bible. If you were wondering, my email does still works, um, real well today. It's working great.

But I would just say, in my view, faith didn't invade politics; politics invaded faith. And so we're trying to address this in a way that says, what does it look like for Jesus to be the primary filter within which I view my life? But one of the flags, one of the indicators that you may be viewing your faith through the lens of your politics rather than the

other way around, is that we, sometimes we go, you know what, I don't have any tension between the priorities of my party and the convictions of my personal faith.

No political party in all of human history was perfect. There will always be tension no matter what your political allegiances are. And if there are no tensions, it's probably saying something about your primary filter for life.

And second, we tend to see complex issues in very simple terms. It's easy. Everything's easy. It's fine. Why can't they just? Why can't he just? Why can't she just? It's oftentimes more difficult when we're willing to look at it with the complexity that's really there. And if that's where you find yourself, it may be time to re-evaluate the role that politics plays in your faith. Let me put it this way: Israel can be God's chosen people, and the nation state of Israel can do things that do not honor God. Both of those things are true.

**We can pursue immigration policies in America while also treating people regardless of their legal status with dignity. Both of those things are true.**

**And I know that I will get a few more notes about just those two sentences in the next few minutes. But let's be the people that reject the polarization of our parties. And remember this: even in a culture that wants no king, if you're a follower of Jesus, you have a king. He's not going anywhere. He's reigning and ruling today. And that's really good news. Would you pray to him with me right now?**

**God, thank you so much. Thank you that as uncertain as the times might seem, God, your future has never been more certain. God, in the midst of whatever we're carrying into this conversation or this series, whatever we're walking through in our own lives, whatever the algorithms are putting in front of those eyes, would you help us turn**

to you maybe like we never have before, and trust you because you are so worthy of it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

So last Thursday was June 19th. And as a nation, it's when we celebrate Juneteenth. It's not the day that slavery was abolished in America, which happened in January 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation. It actually took way longer to spread the word. 2 and 1/2 years later, the news finally reached the last group of enslaved people in Galveston, Texas, making the day that freedom was finally available to everyone in terms of slavery, even the most remote parts of the Confederacy.

Slavery in America has been described as our original sin as a nation. And while we were not the originators of the practice and we were far from the only perpetrators of it, we did perfect its brutality and dehumanization.

**For nearly 250 years, our country depended on the forced labor of people who were seen as property. And here's where it gets even more uncomfortable. And you're like, I'm appropriately uncomfortable right now, Phil. Where it gets even more uncomfortable is that, the leading voices in support of slavery at the time used the Bible to make their point.**

**In 1823, the leader of the first national Baptist denomination, Richard Furman, wrote it this way: He said, "The right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example." No, it's not. But this statement was common. It was the perspective that many people had who professed to be Christians.**

**Now, it's essential to acknowledge that the abolitionist movement to end slavery was also led by followers of Jesus who drew upon the same Bible to make the opposite case. Leaders such as William Wilberforce, Frederick Douglas, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Sojourner Truth.**



**And so today, what I'd like to do is I'd like for us to explore how the Bible could be used and abused this way, how people could end up in such different places about something so fundamental as the fact that we are created in the image of God with infinite dignity, value, and worth, regardless of our skin color.**

**Now, before we dive in, I want to be very clear about how the Bible works as a whole. A lot of times in these conversations, that's where we get in trouble. We forget that the Bible prescribes the ideal and addresses what's real; that, the Bible is a story that was written for us, but not to us, that it spans thousands of years and countless cultures in which the same words can sometimes be used with very different meanings.**

**Now, this entire series underscores a really valuable discipline of study called hermeneutics. It's the study of interpretation. And there**

are three principles that I want to give you before we examine some of the passages relevant to this conversation today.

First is that context is king. We don't just read a verse without the story that it fits in. If I showed you a simple screenshot of a movie that you'd never seen and asked you to tell me about the movie, you might be able to take some guesses, but you're going to miss a whole lot. Your understanding is very, very small.

Second, we use the Bible to interpret the Bible. And that may sound like circular reasoning, but when we let the most clear parts interpret less clear parts, it helps us prioritize the understanding that God is trying to give through that passage and through the overall arc of the scriptures that we're studying.

And finally, descriptive is not prescriptive. Just because the Bible describes something that's happening, like polygamy or patriarchy, or even slavery, doesn't mean that it's endorsing or prescribing the

**practice. The Bible is a story that unfolded in real time in the real world, even the most ugly parts of it.**

**So now, with some of that in the back of your mind, let's look at some passages and see if you can spot the way that those might be abused to be brought to the study to weaponize the Bible for personal or political gain.**

**One of the most quoted passages about the idea that slavery is assumed in the Bible comes from Exodus 21. In this passage, we see key markers about how to treat Hebrew slaves, things like, “When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh, he shall go out free for nothing.” (Exodus 21:2)**

**It certainly sounds like slavery with a time cap, but still slavery. Or “If his master gives him a wife and she, bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her masters, and he shall go out alone”**

**(Exodus 21:2), communicating the idea of an ancient and brutal form of surrogacy.**

**See, the passage goes on to describe very detailed conditions within which Israel was supposed to treat slaves. But remember, the Bible is written for us, but not to us.**

**Israel in this moment has just had about 400 years in Egyptian captivity. They were permanent slaves with little to no compensation based on their race. Sound familiar?**

**See, these codes and the law that they would eventually be included in throughout the Pentatuk, or the first five books of your Bible, they were written in a way that was more about the direction for God's people in a historic moment than the destination of a permanent and perfectly restored world. And that distinction is really important. That's why it's important to ask, okay, what kind of slavery is being**

addressed here? And how does that compare to the atrocities of slavery in our nation's history?

In his book, "How Not to Read the Bible," author Dan Kimball talks about how passages like this can seem shocking or even barbaric to modern readers, especially when we pull them out of context. His point is this: He says, "When we read the Bible without understanding the cultural world it was written in, we can easily misunderstand God's intention." He reminds us that if something in the Bible seems disturbing, it's often because we are applying modern assumptions to ancient frameworks.

See, in ancient Israel, what's being described in Exodus 21 is not race-based lifelong chattel slavery like in the American South. It's more like an indentured servitude system that was built in, that had built-in protections and limits. In fact, in contrast to surrounding nations, the law was uniquely concerned with the dignity of the vulnerable, including those in economic servitude.

**God was moving his people forward from where they were, not instantly to an idealized society, but toward one that more closely reflected God's heart for the world.**

**That's why you find verses like those in Deuteronomy 15, where Hebrew slaves must be released in the seventh year with generosity, not empty-handed. Or in Leviticus 25, where enslaving fellow Israelites permanently was outlawed. You weren't allowed to do it at all. These laws were radical for their time, just not what we wish they were from our time.**

**And then you fast forward to the New Testament, and in Philemon, a letter in your New Testament, the Apostle Paul, he writes not with the authority as an apostle or an author of the New Testament, but as a brother pleading on behalf of a man named Onesimus, a runaway slave who had come to faith in Jesus.**

**And what Paul does is quietly but powerfully subversive. He asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother. That would have upended every cultural assumption and political norm about hierarchy in the Roman world. And yet that's exactly the case that Paul is making.**

**Or take Galatians 3:28, where Paul writes, uh, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, there is no male or female, for we or you are all one in Christ Jesus." See, that wasn't a political policy. It was a new spiritual identity that through Jesus was being made available. And that identity would slowly but surely start to reshape everything else.**

**So, does the Bible support slavery? No. It records it. It regulates it. It reveals God's patience with a broken world in the midst of it. But from Genesis to Revelation, the trajectory is clear: toward freedom, equality, and restored dignity in God's image for all people.**

**Let's not confuse the descriptive passages in the Bible with its prescriptive purpose. The Bible doesn't offer us a static moral code that we just copy and paste from anywhere to anywhere in our world today. It offers a living story that leads to Jesus, the one who comes not to be served, but to serve and to set the captives free.**

**In his book, "Is God a Moral Monster?," Author Paul Copan writes this: He says, "These laws were not given as moral ideals for all time, but as a form of divine damage control."**

**And I know that for us, we may bring a lot of scrutiny to that idea, how could God do that? But I would just say, do you really think that the human race in 2025 is in a position where we can bring a lot of sober judgment to this conversation?**

**See, the difference between the slavery that we see in the pages of the Bible and the slave trade that was so prominent throughout the early part of our history as a nation is stark. The Bible never**



**advocates for the kind of kidnapping and racially targeted permanent property ownership of human beings, or using ethnic groups for financial gain.**

**God's design for human flourishing is clearly a vision of freedom from bondage. And even when that was about moving an imperfect people in a direction out of the abuses that slavery brought, it was still in the direction of the reconciling work of Jesus to see everyone with equal value.**

**See, God's kindness to work with the brokenness of human condition in whatever historic moment we live in is the only reason that we continue to live.**

**If God simply snapped his fingers Thanos-style to create a perfect permanent society with no sin or problems, none of us would make the cut. So be careful about the thing you think you wish God would do.**

**God's patience was a gracious down payment for the full and finished work of Jesus on your behalf. That might feel like a dodge, but in a pre-law tribalistic society like the one within which God selected Israel, and demonstrated incredible patience, we see his kindness.**

**We don't teach kids calculus on their first day of school. We start with what they're where they're at, what they know, and we build from there. That's what God does with you and me too.**

**So what does that mean for us now? Well, it means that we need to treat the Bible not just honestly, but humbly. Honestly enough to admit when something is confusing or offends us, and humbly enough to admit that we may not have the full understanding of what the world was at that moment as we read it in the scriptures, or even God's purpose at the time.**

**Because if we're only looking at the Bible in the places that it affirms what we already think or it skips past the difficult parts, we're not reading scripture, we're reading into it. And for a lot of us, that's exactly what our pattern of scriptures have been. We have a very small sample size of what we read and apply to our lives. And we should be careful of that because we're not the first ones to do that.**

**As a matter of fact, in the 1800s, there was a Bible printed specifically for enslaved people that intentionally removed things like the Exodus story, references to liberation, and anything that might spark hope or resistance. It was called the Negro Slave Bible. Over 90% of the Old Testament and half the New, were literally cut out because the story of scripture, when we read it fully, is just that powerful and points to the picture of freedom that God died to provide.**

**And if we throw out the whole thing the moment we're uncomfortable, we may miss the very thing that God is trying to do in us. In her book, "Inspired," Rachel Held Evans writes, "The Bible isn't a static work but a living conversation. One that invites us to wrestle, to question,**

to explore, and to continue being transformed. God can handle it. His word can hold up to it."

That's exactly what we're doing in this series, by the way. We're not pretending the uncomfortable parts aren't there. We're stepping into them with honesty and trust, believing that God still speaks through this living and breathing book into our lives today. That your questions are worthy of answers.

Now, when we keep Jesus at the center, something powerful happens. We begin to see how the uncomfortable parts of the Bible, they aren't a bug, they're a feature, because they show God stepping into a broken world, working with real people, and pointing them, pointing you towards something better than what we would otherwise settle for.

So today, when you see injustice, when you see racial inequality, exploitation, systems or patterns that still treat people as less than,

**we don't ignore it. We don't write it off because it's just too woke. We lean in because we follow a king who entered into the pain of the world to bring a healing, to bring freedom, and to bring restoration to all people.**

**And yes, we do live in a culture where oftentimes it feels like no one wants anything to do with the Bible, especially as it's used or abused and misunderstood. But your calling is not to be defensive. God doesn't need you to defend him. It's to be different. It's to show people what a thoughtful witness of Jesus looks like in this moment.**

**When we interpret our faith through the lens of our political platforms and the positions with which we align, we run the risk of repeating the very same mistakes that led to these points in history that we are grieving today. The results may look different, but they come from the same rotten interpretation.**

**Let's be the kind of people who live lives that reflect a deeper reading of scripture. One that leads to compassion, to humility, to justice, and to love. Let's read the Bible fully. Not flattening it or filtering it, but following the thread all the way to Jesus, because that's where real freedom is found. It's where it's always been found.**

**Let me finish with a story of a man named Frederick Douglass. He was born into slavery in the year 1818 in Maryland. He never knew the day of his birth. He never knew his father. He was separated from his mother when he was just an infant.**

**By the age of seven, he was working on a plantation, treated as property, starving, and relegated to less than human.**

**At one point, young Frederick was sent to Baltimore to work for a ship builder. His new mistress, Sophia A1, began to teach him the alphabet. She'd never owned a slave before, and so she treated him with unique kindness for the time. But when her husband found out that she was**

teaching him to read, he said, "If you teach him to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave."

Douglas would later write, "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom." So he taught himself to read. He read scraps of newspaper. He borrowed books. And mostly he read the Bible. But the Bible was complicated because the same book that was used by his masters to justify his enslavement was now opening up something entirely different to him.

Yeah. Some preachers in the south, they told enslaved people to obey their masters as they quoted verses out of context. But Douglas saw the full picture. He saw something deeper.

He read the Exodus story. He read the prophets. He read the Gospels. And he saw something that his masters never wanted him to see: that the God of the Bible is a God who sets captives free.

Douglas began to preach first in whispers to fellow slaves, and later in speeches before thousands of people. The one of the most powerful quotes he's given, as, um, kind of historically, he said, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference." May that never be the case for us.

He didn't give up on the Bible either. He gave up on bad interpretations of it. But as he followed Jesus, he actually helped change the moral conscience of a nation.

When we say that the Bible is uncomfortable, we mean it. And the parts of it that are sometimes uncomfortable for us are exactly what we need to be shaped into the vision that God has for us.

I mentioned a Bible that was sort of sanitized and manipulated, the slave Bible that was edited out to make people in power, more in control.



**And I wonder sometimes if today we may be studying a different version of our own slave Bible. Nobody else edited it, but you did. There are parts of it that you find uncomfortable. You have a handful of books that you would say are your favorite or passages that you can recite from memory, but there are major sections of your Bible where the pages are still stuck together.**

**There are sections that point to God's redemptive work for the entire world for all time, and you've never read them because they might bring up questions for you you're not prepared to answer.**

**But I wonder if those things that we avoid because they're difficult, painful, or challenging are actually exactly where God wants you to go. See, we can settle for a version of study where we avoid the things that will point to the blind spots in our life as we journey with Jesus. Or maybe the passages and stories that demand more**

**introspection and study, like those that we'll explore through this series.**

**Uncomfortable doesn't mean untrue. It means that sometimes the Bible has to unmake parts of our faith in order to remake them in a way that aligns to the truth.**

**Frederick Douglas found Jesus in the pages of a book that others had used to justify his chains. What's holding you back from reading it? Maybe reading parts of it for the first time? Maybe today is the day you open up the rest of the story to follow it to Jesus who came to proclaim liberty to the captives, bind up the brokenhearted, and restore dignity to every person made in God's image.**

**May we re-engage the true story of the scriptures, grieve the consequences of their misuse in the past and the present, and live as people shaped not by power or politics, but by the crucified and risen King and Savior, Jesus.**

**So this week, when you watch the news, ask yourself what makes you immediately dismiss something that may be real inequity, simply because it's outside of your political comfort zone.**

**Let's be inquisitive rather than indifferent in those moments to those people created in the image of God. Let's be curious rather than comfortable when it doesn't feel like our world is threatened.**

**One more thing that's worth mentioning in this too, is that there is space for honest repentance in these conversations - that I thought one thing and I changed, I had one attitude and God reshaped it. See I think sometimes we can forget the fact that we're living with this distorted view of people or groups of people or a specific person.**

**We think well I just need to you know this has been a long time, this is just the way that I live It's the way I was brought up It's the...**

No no God can do stuff in your life that you can treat people he made his kids his sons and daughters in a way that he's called us to. It can really happen.

In just a minute in our time together at all of our campuses we're going to sing one of the most famous lyrics of all time, Amazing Grace. The original hymn was written by John Newton, a pastor and abolitionist. But the things we sing rightfully in that song that are beautiful and have had it carried century after century, those things were only true of him. They were only lyrics he could write after he became a Christian. See before he wrote this song, before he was a pastor, before he was an abolitionist, he was a slave trader.

As he wrote these lyrics, you can imagine the images of people that he treated like property, where his heart was, what his attitude was, the things that he could have done everything in his life to try to

**forget and yet he let God have access to that part of his heart. What is the part of your heart that God wants access to today?**

**Let's be careful to avoid the extremes of cheap grace without repentance, or a version of moral purity tests that leave no room for God's work to change people.**

**The great news of the gospel is that God loves you, that he died for you and it's not just about you getting to heaven someday. It's about heaven getting to you today; that his kingdom would come, his will would be done even in the headlines today as they are in heaven. Would you pray with me?**

**God, as we think about what's going on in our world today, we are so grateful, so grateful for Your longsuffering, so grateful for Your endurance and patience. That, God, if it depended on us, if it depended on me, if it depended on moral perfection, God, we would**

have no hope. But Your perfection, Your plan, Your purposes, God, they're unshakable. They will never fail.

God, would You help us to see the amazing grace that we needed and that the people, the groups, the political parties, the people that we might put on the other side of whatever mental fence we have in our heart—remind us, God, that Your amazing grace is for them too.

I pray for the Christians in Iran right now, a church that's been growing exponentially in these last several years, and they're feeling the events of these last couple days in a way we can't comprehend. Would You be close to the brokenhearted? God, would You keep them safe? Would You help them to with kindness and love, communicate the eternity-shaping message of Your Son?

God, we are one body, united by You. Would You remind us of that today? In Jesus' name, Amen.

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## Resources

### BOOKS:

- *Is God a Moral Monster?* – Paul Copan  
[Link](#)
- *How (Not) to Read the Bible: Making Sense of the Anti-women, Anti-science, Pro-violence, Pro-slavery and Other Crazy-Sounding Parts of Scripture* - Dan Kimball  
[Link](#)
- *The Atlantic Slave Trade, 2nd edition (New Approaches to the Americas) 2nd Edition* - Herbert S. Klein  
[Link](#)
- *The Drama of Scripture* – Craig Bartholomew & Michael Goheen  
[Link](#)
- *Christian Slavery: Conversion and Race in the Protestant Atlantic World (Early American Studies)* - Katharine Gerbner  
[Link](#)
- *Reading While Black* – Esau McCaulley  
[Link](#)
- *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again* – Rachel Held Evans  
[Link](#)
- *The Lost World of the Torah* – John Walton  
[Link](#)

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## PODCASTS:

- [Ask NT Wright Anything](#)  
Offers thoughtful responses to theological questions, including topics like election, gender, and violence.
- [BibleProject Podcast – “Character of God” series](#)  
Breaks down who God is—even when He seems angry or distant.
- [Undeceptions with John Dickson](#)  
Each episode tackles a misunderstood or controversial issue of faith.

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## WEBSITES:

- [The Center for Hebraic Thought](#)  
Academic and pastoral resources on how the Bible thinks, especially for understanding OT laws and ethics.
- [Ruth Haley Barton – Transforming Center](#)  
Tools for soul reflection during a series that invites discomfort and depth.
- [Fuller Seminary’s “FULLER studio”](#)  
Videos, articles, and lectures from a wide range of scholars engaging modern faith questions.



